

Warm-ups, Work-outs and Wind-downs: Vocabulary Practice

By William R. Holden

One of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language, particularly in an EFL context, is the retention of vocabulary. The role of context, which provides the lexical environment, has been identified as one of the crucial factors in vocabulary acquisition. Unfortunately, however, in Japan as in much of Asia, students are often expected (read: required) to master long lists of decontextualized words in order to pass standardized examinations. This leads students to translate and memorize, but not internalize, the lexis to which they are exposed. Teachers are faced with the task of providing a means by which students can go beyond the limitation of short term memory and begin to make the lexis their own through the development of learning strategies and active use. The following is a list of activities that students have found interesting and useful in their attempts to build vocabulary. Many of the activities are based on the use of word cards.

Word Cards (for recording and recycling vocabulary)

Students write cards for each new word they encounter. On the front of the card are the word (phrase, etc.), its phonetic transcription, and a student-generated sentence featuring the item. Students should be encouraged to draw pictures on the cards which will help them recall the word or phrase. In the top right corner is the date, in the bottom right corner the source (book and page number, etc.), in the top left hand corner a tick box (to be filled when the word has been learned) and in the bottom left corner the notation A/P (for active/passive). The back of the card can contain a translation of the word if the teacher feels it is advisable.

Each student divides his or her own cards into three groups (active, passive, and known). Attention should focus on the active and known groups for low-level learners, with passive cards added at higher levels.

First, students should review their known words for about 5-10 minutes using one of the warm-up games which follow. Words not recalled are moved to the active set for review; all players should note down unknown words that occur during play.

Next, students move on to their active category of words to play another warm-up game. A work-out activity is introduced (or chosen) and the game proceeds. (The number of cards per student should be appropriate to the time available for the activity and the level of the group.)

Finally, a wind-down activity at the end of class allows time for questions, card writing and reviewing the target vocabulary. Time permitting, another game with new vocabulary introduced during that lesson may be played.

Warm-ups

1. Password

Materials: *word cards*

Students play in pairs or groups. Each player chooses 5-10 cards and places them face up on the desk. Duplicates should be eliminated. All players study the cards for 3 minutes. The cards are then turned face down. One player (or team) chooses a card and gives a synonym, antonym or sentence with the word missing to elicit the word. Cards are turned face up as they are identified. Play continues until the words have all been identified. The group or pair with the most cards showing at the end of the game wins.

2. Scrambled words

Materials: *10 word cards per player, paper, and pencil*

Students play in pairs or groups. Each player chooses 10 cards and places them face up on the desk. Duplicates should be eliminated. All players study the cards for 3 minutes. The cards are then turned face down. Students then exchange cards with their partner and write the letters of each word in scrambled order. The paper with the scrambled words is then given to the owner of the cards. Students then compete to see who can most quickly recompose their entire list correctly. Cards are then returned and lists checked for accuracy. Cards can also be shuffled and dealt randomly to players when playing in groups.

3. Translation review

Materials: *10 word cards per player*

Students play in pairs or groups. Each player chooses 10 cards and places them with the English side facing up. Duplicates should be eliminated. All players study the cards for 3 minutes. The cards are then turned over to show the native-language side up. One player/team then calls out a word in the native language, and the opposing player/team must locate the card and give the meaning in English within a set time. Alternatively, the language order could be reversed or the students asked to call out the word in the language not currently shown on the cards. The team/player with the most cards wins.

4. Give me a word that begins with.

Materials: *10 word cards per player*

Students play in pairs or groups. Each player chooses 10 cards and places them on the desk English side facing up. All players study the cards for 3 minutes. The cards are then turned with the native-language side up. One player/team then calls out a letter in the target language, and the opposing player/team must locate a card with a word which begins with that letter within a set time. The team/player with the most cards wins. A penalty may be imposed for calling out first letters that do not correspond to cards in play.

5. Alphabet circle

Materials: *10-15 word cards per player*

Students play in pairs or groups. Each player chooses 10-15 cards and places them with the English side facing up on the desk. All players study the cards for 3 minutes. The cards are then turned with the native- language side up. One player/team then calls out a word in the native language beginning with A. The next player (or a player indicated by student "A") must then recall and say a word beginning with B within a set time. When there are no "B" words in play, the player must supply one, but is penalized for substituting when one is present. Players get 1 point per word. The number of plays depends on the number of players (twice for a pair, three times for a triad, etc. until each player has started with "A".) The game can be paced by having the students clap in time or count.

6. Snap

Materials: *40 word cards, 10 each of the same word*

The dealer shuffles and deals out all the cards. Players may not look at their cards. The player on the dealer's left begins the play by putting his or her first card on the table face up. The play continues to the left, with each player adding his or her top card to the stack on the table as quickly as possible. When two identical cards appear consecutively, the first player to shout "SNAP!" takes all the cards.

7. Slap

Materials: *25 word cards, (each group should have the same set of cards)*

Four to six players are needed. The word cards are placed face up on the desk. The teacher (or a student in turn in each group) must give a synonym or antonym, perform a charade, etc. to convey the meaning of the word. The student who recognizes the word must slap it. Correct choice earns the card, and the player with the most cards wins.

8. Spelling bee

Materials: *Blackboard and chalk, list of words from word cards*

Students stand beside their desks-each row comprises a team. The first player receives a piece of chalk. When the teacher calls out a word, the students must run to the board and write it. S/he then gives the chalk to the next student in line and goes to the end of the line. The team with the most words correctly spelled wins. Alternatively, the teacher can give a synonym, antonym, etc. to convey the meaning of the word, and the students discuss the meaning before the representative runs to write it.

Work-outs

1. Crossword puzzles

Materials: *Blank, numbered crossword puzzle sheets or sheets with only across/ down entries filled.*

Students play in pairs. One must fill in vocabulary words vertically and the other horizontally. The students' puzzles contain the words they must define for their partners. Play begins with student A asking "What's #1 across/down"? and player B gives the meaning of the word. B then receives a clue from A for another item and the game proceeds. Students can also design puzzles on blank, numbered grids and then exchange them with other groups. Words are first entered to complete the puzzles and then separate A/B copies made. The teacher can then collect the originals for re-use.

2. Charades

Materials: *list of words from word cards, cut into strips*

Students play in groups of 3-5. Each group is assigned a word that they must act out to convey the meaning. One member of each group leaves the group/room while the others discuss how best to act out the word. The representatives from each group return and the charade begins. The representative who identifies the word first earns a point for his or her group. Groups may play with the same or with different words.

3. Story circle

Materials: *list of words from word cards, cut into strips*

Students play in groups of 3-5. Each member is assigned a group of words that they must use in the context of a story. The order in which they use them is up to them. The first player able to do so says a sentence containing one of the words. The player to the left must add a sentence using one of his/her words. Play proceeds until a time limit has been reached or the words are depleted. (Note: the teacher should choose the cards carefully.)

4. Short stories

Materials: *list of words from word cards, cut into strips*

Students play in groups of 3-5. Each group is assigned a group of words (the number depends on their ability and time restraints) that they must use in a story. The words may be used in any order, but must all be used in the course of the story. A time limit should be imposed. (Note: the teacher should choose the cards carefully.)

5. Skits

Materials: *list of words from word cards, cut into strips*

Students play in groups of 3-5. Each group is assigned a group of words (the number depends on their ability and time restraints) that they must use in a skit. The words may be used in any order, but all must be used in the course of the skit. The skit is then acted out for the group. The audience must then guess the words that are contained in the skit. (Note: the teacher should choose the cards carefully.)

6. What's the connection

Materials: *word cards, blank word cards*

Students prepare 3 cards for homework. Each card should contain 5-10 words that clearly belong to one category (i.e. foods, sports words, adjectives, etc.). Students play in pairs. Student A reads the words on his or her first card aloud in order, and student B guesses the category. Roles are then reversed, with B reading. When groups have finished, they should exchange cards with another group and continue.

Wind-downs

1. Word charts

Materials: *Notebook and pencil*

Working individually, students draw grids in their notebook for newly learned vocabulary.

This provides the basis for a personal dictionary that is arranged chronologically and can be used for review. To encourage maintaining such a dictionary, extra credit may be given or the use of the dictionary allowed during tests. Students should be encouraged to fill in the usage column for related forms as well.

2. Semantic feature analysis

Materials: *Notebook and pencil*

Students work in groups and write individually. In a notebook, students draw matrices for newly learned vocabulary. When presenting vocabulary associated with a topic (e.g. the weather) students discuss the topic and brainstorm for words that describe it. (Teachers should encourage dictionary work!) The words are put on the blackboard. The words are then assigned to the correct season on a semantic map. Students then fill in their matrices: in the column on the left, the seasons; at the top (diagonally) the features from the brainstorming session and the vocabulary presented in the lesson. The boxes in the grid can then be checked for features that correspond to the weather in a particular season; alternately, symbols for frequency of occurrence (sometimes, often, seldom, never) can be used. A review can incorporate pair interviews on the weather in each student's country or region.

3. Categorize/Organize words

Materials: *Notebook and pencil*

Students work in groups and write individually. In a notebook, students make columns from newly learned vocabulary. New words are categorized in columns that clearly reflect the relationship of those words. For example, classroom objects, weather words, verbs related to particular parts of the body, etc., lend themselves nicely to this type of activity. Students should be encouraged to determine the relationships themselves to make the activity more personally relevant, and to review existing categories and add new vocabulary to them before starting new ones. These lists also make good starting points for Story Circle, Skits, Short Stories, and What's the Connection? (above).

4. Total recall

Materials: *Paper and pencil; alternatively, word cards*

Students write the target vocabulary on strips of paper, 2 strips for each word. All players study the cards for 3 minutes, then the cards are turned over. The first player chooses a card at random and reads it to the group. S/he must then find its mate, and use the word in a sentence. Doing so allows the student to keep both cards. The play then rotates to the left.

While these activities are neither new nor the final solution to the problems of vocabulary acquisition and retention, they are interesting and easy to use, and encourage students to take a more active, personal approach to vocabulary development. They have the added advantages of being self-paced and regulated, and of encouraging students to learn cooperatively.

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